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Accusatory Based Discourse Strategies

Josie Richards

Apologias are common ways to repair one's image amongst those in public leadership positions, like politicians. However, these orated defenses are not limited to politicians. They extend into the realm of the athletic, the performance arts and even popular culture. Apologias have now become common amongst anyone in the public eye wishing to repair their image using public statements.

The purpose of this paper is to suggest that an orator can strategically pick discourse strategies when issuing their apologia if they understand the subsequent kategoria. To do so, I will provide a theoretical background of apologia, kategoria and image repair theory and its relation to apologetic rhetoric. I will rely on what will be termed *accusatory based discourse strategies*, which simply means to choose the rhetorical strategy depending on the component of the negative attitude one wishes to combat, to suggest that by understanding the kategoria, an orator can better tailor their apologia to combat the negative attitudes of their respective audiences.

1. Apologia

Apologia can be defined as a genre of rhetorical oration that focuses on the defense of one's self against negative accusations of one's moral nature, motives or reputation.¹ It literally means a speech in defense of one's self. It is not to be mistaken with an apology. Where apologia can encompass aspects of an apology, an apology is not necessarily apologia. Apologia can include admissions of guilt and feelings of remorse which are aspects that most individuals would credit to an apology. However, what differentiates an apology from apologia is that

¹ Ware and Linkugel, 2, 1973

apologia is often done in public, and an admission of guilt is not required, whereas an apology can be public or private and an admission of guilt is required.

Apologia, as a subject of study, was developed by Ware and Linkugel in the 1970's. Ware and Linkugel developed their ideas out of a paper by Robert Abelson.² In his paper, Abelson identified four typologies for solving conflict: denial, differentiation, transcendence and bolstering. Ware and Linkugel expanded on these four typologies and were able to deepen their meanings in relation to the apologetic form.³ They also added four types of discourse that resulted from binary combinations of the four typologies (i.e. absolute, vindictive, explanative and justificative).⁴ From this, Benoit went on to expand Ware and Linkugel's ideas to create what is called image repair theory.

Image repair theory was created by Benoit in 1995 and was developed out of Ware and Linkugel's criteria for assessing apologia rhetoric.⁵ Benoit's work expanded the four caveats in Ware and Linkugel's work to fourteen, which he then grouped into five categories, which will be discussed shortly. For now, I will discuss the importance of image repair theory and its relation to apologia rhetoric.

Image repair theory focuses on repairing an orator's image once it has been tarnished in one way or another. A damaged image invites scrutiny and criticism which can reduce the credibility and persuasiveness of an individual. A damaged image may also cause individuals, groups or organizations to treat the tarnished individual in a different manner.⁶ Hence, being able to repair one's image once it has been tarnished is quite important for those living in the public

² Abelson, 1959

³ Ware & Linkugel, 274, 1973

⁴ Ware & Linkugel, 282- 283, 1973

⁵ Benoit, 1995

⁶ Benoit, 2015

eye. Image repair theory seeks to understand the ways in which an individual uses rhetoric to fix their image.

Vital to image repair theory is the notion of audience; for if there were no audience to perceive the image of an orator, the orator would have no image to repair. For an orator to even want to start repairing their image, they have to first believe that the audience holds a negative attitude towards them. Whether or not the audience does actually perceive the orator in a negative light is irrelevant. All that matters is the orator's belief in the audience's negative attitude. Once there is a belief, the orator can engage in several strategies to repair their image; however, I would argue that they first need to understand the attack, or *kategoria* and the negative public attitude that resulted as a preliminary step for crafting a speech of forgiveness.

2. *Kategoria*

Kategoria can be defined as a speech of accusation. The importance of *kategoria* was first emphasized by Halford Ryan in the early 1980's.⁷ Ryan argued that by understanding the accusations in tandem to the defense, one could more adequately critique the rhetorical strategies of both. I would go one step further to suggest that by understanding *kategoria*, the orator could gain insight into potentially effective image repair strategies. For example, if an individual knew that the offense they were charged with had no physical evidence to substantiate the claim, they could easily engage in an image repair strategy employing denial. However, without having full knowledge of the accusation, denial may not have been a feasible strategy because there could have been substantiating evidence for the accusation that would refute the denial. Knowledge of *kategoria* becomes important to choosing image repair strategies within *apologia* rhetoric

⁷ Ryan, 1982

because “one cannot expect a successful image repair effort without clearly understanding the attacks one faces.”⁸

To turn our attention back to the notion of audience, an attack on an individual’s image can produce negative feelings towards them from their audience. An attack on one’s image consists of two components, an alleged undesirable act, or offense and a call for responsibility, accountability or blame.⁹ These two components, impact the attitude of one’s audience. Attitudes are cognitions or thoughts that are developed through direct experience and communication.¹⁰ They also consist of two components: beliefs and values. There is a belief that something occurred, and there is a value attached to that particular occurrence. For example, an individual who values the traits of honesty and integrity could believe that I stole something. Since the act of stealing goes against the values of said individual, the result of my perceived theft as an action would be the formation of a negative attitude towards me because I engaged in a behavior that runs contrary to that individual’s value system.

To change attitudes and repair one’s image to one’s respective audience, one must identify the belief and relevant value that contribute to the negative attitude that occurs as a result of an attack. This is what image repair discourse is all about. It aims to change individual’s attitudes or perceptions about an orator by changing the belief they hold and the relevant value.

3. Image Repair Theory

Now that I’ve gone through the descriptions of *apologia* and *kategoria* as well as touched on their respective importance, I will expand on Benoit’s image repair theory that was briefly mentioned. According to Benoit, there are fourteen strategies, divided into five categories that an

⁸ Benoit, 31, 2015

⁹ Wen, Tzu-Hsiang & Benoit, 175, 2009

¹⁰ Benoit, 7, 2015

orator can use in apologia rhetoric. The five categories are denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action and mortification; three of these categories have sub-strategies. These strategies can be used to either change the negative belief the audience holds towards the orator into a positive one, or reduce the offensiveness of an action the orator committed as an attempt to lessen the negative reaction.

Denial, the first category, is an attempt to completely disavow responsibility for an offense. Within this category, there are two sub-strategies, simple denial and shifting the blame. Simple denial is when an orator directly opposes an accusation. When using simple denial, the orator would claim that they had committed whatever the alleged offense was. Shifting the blame occurs when an orator claims that the alleged offense was caused by another person, or event rather than their self. When shifting the blame, an orator would first deny that they themselves committed the alleged offense and then would go on to blame friends, family, etc. Benoit contends, that of the two sub-strategies, shifting the blame may be more effective, as it directly addresses a negative belief and provides a scapegoat for that belief.¹¹ Whereas, simple denial, can leave an audience without a target for their negative feelings.

Evading responsibility, the second category, attempts to lessen the responsibility the orator has in regards to the alleged offense. Most often, it provides excusable reasons for why they behaved in the manner that they did. This category has four sub-strategies: provocation, defeasibility, accident and good intention. Provocation occurs when an orator admits that they committed the alleged offense but that it was committed in reaction to some other greater offense. For example, an orator would admit to an allegation of cheating on their wife, but that they only did so because their wife had previously cheated on them. Defeasibility is enacted

¹¹ Benoit, 22, 2015

when the orator claims that the offense that occurred was out of their control. This may be due to a lack of information, as seen in George Bush's War on Terrorism speech,¹² or an inability to control the situation, which was a feature of the infamous Chappaquiddick speech.¹³ A defense using defeasibility allowed the orators, in those two situations, to acknowledge their role in the offense, while still allowing them to lessen their share of the blame. Accidents are enacted when an orator admits to an offense, but claims that it occurred unintentionally. Lastly, good intentions occur when the orator attempts to convince the audience that there were good intentions behind the offensive act. The orator would argue that the performance of the action in question ought to be justified based on the intent rather than the outcome.¹⁴ This would leave the orator much less responsible for the actual outcome, as it was not something they intended to happen. An example of this would be Trump's justification for the initial Muslim travel ban.

Both the strategies of denial and evading responsibility aim to change the belief that the orator is to blame for an offense. Changing the belief component of the attitude is the first step in the two-step process of changing the negative attitude of the audience. These strategies seek to change the belief that one ought to be responsible, or held accountable for some action, by either removing the offensive action from the orator by removing them from the situation or, by justifying the action in order to change the audience's attitude held towards it. Denial flat out denies that the offense occurred, while evading responsibility admits that the act has occurred and provides reasons to justify its occurrence.

The following three categories of reducing offensiveness, corrective action and mortification deal with changing the value component of the audience's negative attitude. These

12 Benoit, 2006

13 Kennedy, 1969

14 Benoit, 23-24, 2015

strategies attempt to change the values associated with an offense by reframing the situation, or by showing remorse and offering aid. We can call this step two of the two-step process.

Reducing offensiveness, our third category attempts to lessen the “degree of ill feeling experienced by the audience.”¹⁵ This technique attempts to highlight the positive qualities of the orator or diminish the negativity associated with the charge. This strategy has six sub-strategies: bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attacking the accuser and compensation.

Bolstering is the only sub-strategy that targets the character of the orator. It is used to increase the number of positive feelings and beliefs the audience has towards the orator. Although the amount of negative affect from the offense remains the same, the orator would play up positive qualities they have such as respectability, humility, strength etc. in an attempt to overshadow the negative traits being associated with them.

The remaining five sub-strategies of reducing offensiveness target the offense itself. They do not deny that the orator committed the offense and they do not diminish the orator’s responsibility for the offense.¹⁶ They simply attempt to reduce the immoral connotations associated with the act.

Minimization occurs when the orator attempts to lessen the perceived damages the offense caused. Minimization often works in tandem with differentiation. Differentiation attempts to distinguish the offense from other similar but more offensive things. In doing this, the orator’s offense would not look nearly as bad in comparison to what could have occurred. For example, one might claim they borrowed something without asking rather than haven stolen it.¹⁷ Here, the orator is using the specific wording, ‘borrows’ rather than ‘stolen’ to lessen the

15 Benoit, 24, 2015

16 Benoit, 25-26, 2015

17 Benoit, 25, 2015

perceived damage of their action in the eyes of their audience. Or, an orator could claim that even though they took X, they didn't take W, Y, and Z and it would only have been stealing if they took everything. By comparing their transgression to a similar but worse offense, it makes their own transgression look better.

Transcendence occurs when the orator attempts to place the offense in a broader, more favorable context. By reframing the offense within a positive context, the orator can depict themselves as a hero, or a good citizen and hence improve their image. For example, think about the 'Make America Great Again' rhetoric President Trump uses to position himself as the hero coming to the United States of America's aid.

Attacking the accuser occurs when the orator attempts to undermine the accuser's credibility. By doing so, it calls into question whether the alleged offense actually occurred because the accuser is no longer a trustworthy or reliable source. It may also serve as a way to create an impression that the victim(s) of the offense deserved what befell them.¹⁸ Lastly, compensation occurs when the orator reimburses the victim(s) of the offense. This could come in the form of monetary payment or other gifts.

The fourth category of corrective action occurs when the orator "vows to fix the problem."¹⁹ This strategy is similar to compensation, but the difference is that "corrective action addresses the actual source of injury, whereas compensation consists of a gift to counterbalance, rather than correct, the injury."²⁰ The orator can attempt to correct the damage an offense has caused by replacing whatever was damaged. For example, if an accusers house was damaged due to some kind of negligence, the orator could have the home rebuilt. If the offensive action is one

18 Benoit, 25, 2015

19 Benoit, 26, 2015

20 Ibid.

that could reoccur, the orator can take steps to ensure that the offense does not reoccur in the future. To contrast corrective action with compensation, an orator using compensation as a strategy would not replace the damaged house, but instead, they could provide free groceries for a year or something like that. The accuser in this situation would be receiving something for the damage, but it would not necessarily replace what was damaged.

The fifth and last category is mortification. Mortification occurs when the orator uses the phrase 'I am sorry.' Usually, this utterance conveys an admittance of guilt and an acknowledgment of responsibility for the offensive behavior to the audience. However, it can also be used in a more ambiguous way to convey an expression of sympathy.²¹ Regardless of which meaning the orator intends, when using mortification they apologize for the offense and ask for forgiveness. This strategy is often employed when the offense cannot be brushed aside as too many accusations place responsibility for the offense on the orator. For example, when tennis professional Maria Sharapova failed her drug test,²² she could not deny the fact that she had failed the test. This was an undisputable fact, backed up by chemical testing. Sharapova acknowledged that she acted immorally by using mortification amongst other strategies. Sharapova was unable to deny the allegations brought against her because there was too much evidence placing responsibility for the offense on herself, therefore she had to invoke a different strategy in her apologia.

4. Accusatory Based Discourse Strategies

Ryan contends that a critic of rhetoric will gain insight into both apologia and kategoria when they are understood as a speech set.²³ I would also contend, that the insight that is gained

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ubha, 2016

²³ Ryan, 254, 1982

would lend credence to the claim that there could be strategic ways, to employ image repair discourse when issuing an apology if one analyzes the accompanying kategoria.

Benoit touches on these strategic maneuvers in his latest book (2015) but does not go into detail. Therefore, I will term these strategic maneuvers ‘accusatory based discourse strategies’. Accusatory based discourse strategies can simply be understood as an amalgamation of Benoit’s image repair theory and Ryan’s understanding of kategoria and apology as a joint set theory, with an additional focus on how an orator ought to go about inducing attitudinal changes in their audience.

Accusatory based discourse strategies would suggest that are three ways that one can adequately issue apology based on the accompanying kategoria. If one wishes to target the blame aspect, one ought to incorporate Benoit’s strategies of denial or evading responsibility into their apology. If one wishes to target the offensive aspect, one ought to incorporate Benoit’s strategy of reducing offensiveness into their apology. And finally if one wishes to target both aspects, one ought to incorporate Benoit’s strategies of corrective action and mortification²⁴ into their apology. These three strategies do not limit an orator to solely using the specified rhetorical tactics. Instead, they suggest which tactics should be prominent in apology to adequately address the attack and achieve the goal of image repair.

24 Benoit, 31, 2015

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